

To Permanent Representatives of all member states
to the Council of Europe

Brussels, 4 March 2015

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS OFFICE

Ref: B1660

Dear Ambassadors,

GUILTY OF DEFENDING RIGHTS: AZERBAIJAN'S HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND ACTIVISTS BEHIND BARS

Amnesty International would like to draw your attention to our enclosed report [*Guilty of Defending Rights: Azerbaijan's Human Rights Defenders and Activists behind Bars*](#), published today. The briefing documents the mounting persecution of government critics in Azerbaijan. Threats, physical violence, and imprisonment have become the hallmark of the Azerbaijan regime, as the country prepares to host the first European Games.

Amnesty International has documented a pattern of intensified harassment and intimidation of activists, journalists and human rights defenders by the Azerbaijani authorities in recent years. This new briefing shows that the latest arrests have effectively paralysed civil society and shut down all space for the expression of views that are in any way critical of the government. The current level of repression of the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly mark the nadir of the country's human rights record since its independence in 1991.

In June 2014, President Aliyev stated in his address to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) that freedom of expression, association and assembly are assured in Azerbaijan. However, prominent human rights defenders spoke of a different reality. They detailed more than 90 instances of harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrest and politically motivated charges against human rights defenders, journalists, and other persons daring to criticise the Azerbaijani government. The response of the authorities was swift; within a matter of weeks, those who had given their testimony to PACE were arrested, one after another.

Amnesty International counts at least 22 prisoners of conscience that are currently languishing in prison or in detention in Azerbaijan awaiting trial following trumped up charges ranging from fraud and embezzlement to abuse of drugs and even treason. The cases highlighted in this briefing show that the authorities have indiscriminately targeted high profile government critics, journalists, popular bloggers, and outspoken young activists. They also introduced repressive laws and bureaucratic regulations restricting NGO registration and access to international funds. Reports of interference with the right to legal counsel, confessions extracted under duress and ongoing ill-treatment in detention reinforce the message that the government is prepared to disregard all human rights protections in pursuit of its aim.

These serious human rights violations continued unabated during Azerbaijan's Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. While the Azerbaijani government has step-by-step silenced political opposition, critical voices, and individuals and groups dedicated to defending human rights, the international community and Council of Europe member states have so far been conspicuous by their silence about Azerbaijan's repressive tactics and violations. This is short-sighted and a deep disservice to those currently languishing behind bars.

Amnesty International urges you to end your silence and take a strong public stance against Azerbaijan's repression and human rights violations, by calling on the Azerbaijani authorities to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience
- Fully and impartially investigate all allegations of ill-treatment by state and non-state actors
- Cease from threatening and criminally charging people for exercising their freedom of expression and association

We thank you for your attention and we remain at your disposal should you require further information.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ivana McGowan', written in a cursive style.

Ivana McGowan
Acting Director
Amnesty International European Institutions Office

Cc: Committee of Ministers Secretariat